

5.2. Improve skills, knowledge and professionalism of tourism stakeholders

This Strategic Action strengthens Montana's tourism product and marketing efforts.

Recommended Tactics

MTOT, TAC, Regions, CVBs

- » Develop a cohesive industry training and knowledge plan.
 - Conduct needs assessments to identify the knowledge and skills most needed by industry members to succeed as individual businesses and organizations and collectively as an industry.
 - Conduct needs assessments to identify the knowledge and skills needed by Montana DMOs and their Boards to succeed as organizations and to foster the success of their destinations.
 - Evaluate the relative effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of live training; independent training tools such as training videos or interactive online tools; and downloadable documents.
 - Maximize the potential of existing industry gatherings – such as the Governor's Conference, TAC meetings, Regions & CVB meetings, Board meetings, and Superhost Training Seminars – and regular communication within the industry for training and knowledge building. Use gatherings to inform needs assessments, provide training, and raise awareness of knowledge resources that are available.
 - Identify and develop partnerships with entities that can provide valuable training.
 - Establish follow up mechanisms after training or use of knowledge tools to gauge whether the skills or knowledge are being applied to business/organizational operations. Adjust the training plan as needed to improve uptake and application of resources.
- » Create an easily accessible Resource Library for tourism stakeholders.
 - Include how-to guides, self-evaluation guides, reports, templates, online training tools, and other resources that are relevant, digestible, and applicable to meet the identified needs of stakeholders.
 - Make use of existing, publicly available resources to the greatest degree possible (using links and abiding by fair use protocols).
 - Encourage contributions by stakeholders of useful resources they have found, and acknowledge these contributions.
 - Index ITRR materials to ensure that stakeholders can easily locate the specific information they need or want.
- » Explore opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

- Develop a template for success stories to ensure that they will offer insights, lessons learned, and best practices for readers. Strongly encourage and acknowledge contributions of success stories.
 - Consider establishing online discussion boards (e.g., Yahoo Groups) where stakeholders can collaborate on specific shared concerns, objectives, or initiatives. If discussion boards are to be used, adopt protocols to be used by all boards; for example, limiting the scope of discussion, setting procedures for designating moderators, and setting out the requirements for public access.
- » Evaluate the target audiences, subject matter, and effectiveness of the Superhost training programs. Expand, revise, and update the programs based on current research and best practices from the tourism and adult learning fields, and on needs assessments that have been carried out.

Regions, CVBs, Communities, Tribes

- » Make full use of information and training tools to strengthen organizational capacity, organizational success, and sector success.
- » Submit success stories from the Region or community for inclusion in the Resource Library.
- » Facilitate training and learning (“capacity building”) by businesses and organizations in the Region/ community.

Businesses & Organizations

- » Make full use of information and training tools to strengthen organizational success and sector success.
- » Share proven successful ideas and activities and success stories by submitting them for inclusion in the Resource Library.

Indicators of Success

- » Needs assessments and an evaluation of training methods have been used to develop a cohesive industry training plan.
- » A well-curated collection of existing learning resources is readily available to stakeholders in a Resource Library. Materials are well-indexed, allowing stakeholders to easily find what is most useful to them. Training and information resources are available for Regions and CVBs to strengthen marketing skills and expertise in DMO best practices. Training and information resources are available for all stakeholders to improve functional knowledge and adoption of tourism industry best practices.
- » Stakeholder gatherings and regular communications are used effectively to implement the training plan.
- » Feedback from stakeholders indicates that training is being applied in their daily operations and has improved their operations.

- » Learning and knowledge resources are frequently accessed by stakeholders. Feedback from stakeholders indicates that these resources have significant value for their operations and are easy to access and use.
- » Success stories and other learning resources are submitted by stakeholders and collected by MTOT to expand and improve the Resource Library and the Strategic Plan.
- » Current research and best practices from the fields of tourism and adult learning have been used to assess the Superhost training programs and make any necessary changes.

Background & Rationale

A good visitor experience depends upon good delivery by businesses and stakeholders, many of which are small businesses with few resources and limited capacity. As a result, training of these frontline stakeholders is often identified as a critical success factor for destinations (Blackman, Foster, Hyvonen, Jewell, Kuiboer, & Moscardo, 2004).

DMOs, too, have limited resources and capacity but need to keep abreast of best practices in the industry. The training and information needs have become more acute in recent years as emerging technologies – the internet, mobile devices, and Web 2.0 – revolutionize the field of destination marketing (Hernandez, 2013). During strategic plan community input sessions, stakeholders expressed a need and a desire for knowledge in several key areas, including:

- » visitor expectations and how to meet them;
- » the utility and application of the Montana Brand for their business or organization;
- » the utility of the strategic plan for their business or organization;
- » how travelers use electronic media (especially mobile) and how stakeholders can make use of it effectively and with a low burden;
- » improving customer service by frontline staff; and
- » how to implement desired projects such as improving curb appeal.

Research confirms that small businesses face many obstacles to training – including time constraints due to day-to-day operational demands of the business; inflexibility of hours or location of training; and costs (of training and time lost). In addition, many attach a *low* value to training (particularly for staff) because direct benefits are difficult to identify.

Small business owners, in particular, are most likely to seek learning materials when trying to address a specific problem. Learning opportunities are most highly valued by small business operators when they (i) are directly relevant and immediately applicable to concrete business activities, (ii) offer new or updated information, and (iii) are highly informative. Small business learning is based upon the practical need to learn and adapt in the context of the business environment. As a result, “the business constantly needs to know what it needs to learn *how* it might learn it and *who* from.” Similarly, research in the field of adult education finds that adults learn best when training has immediate applicability.

Research highlights the importance of conducting a needs assessment to identify concrete and immediate skills and knowledge that should be offered to stakeholders. Training resources, themselves, can be used to help establish needs. Training units can be developed to walk industry members through a self-evaluation of their own operation, for example self-evaluation of their product or service quality or of visitor satisfaction. The self-evaluations can then be used in aggregate to shape the choice of training materials to be made available and can help individual stakeholders in selecting materials and allocating their time to learning.

The mode of training is also important but studies have found conflicting preferences – interactive versus non-interactive; in-house independent learning versus off-site events; electronic versus print – suggesting that the specific preferences of *Montana* stakeholders must be discovered. Based upon comments made in community sessions, the initial indication is that independent learning tools are preferred due to the time constraints and the inflexibility of work hours faced by many small business operators.

Because electronic resources (interactive or not) will be an important cost-effective means of providing training and disseminating knowledge, this strategic action should be considered in the development and maintenance of an electronic media strategy (Strategic Action 4.2.).

Research has consistently found that gaining knowledge from *peers* is highly valued and more effective than learning from other sources, suggesting that informal exchanges of experiences as well as the dissemination of “success stories” may be a useful and cost-effective part of the training resources.